

## Mrs. Dalloway and Three of Its Contemporary Children

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How human beings make connections is central to Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, as suggested by the "omnibus" narrative technique of the novel itself, which dips into the various minds of its characters as the story's day progresses. The dramatis personae link themselves, in their thoughts, with one another, and the reader is required to create an analogical matrix amongst them, in a manner similar to the one Mark Schorer disclosed in *Middlemarch*. As J. Hillis Miller writes, "The novel is especially fitted to investigate not so much the depths of individual minds as the nuances of relationship between mind and mind" (*Fiction* 177). This experience of sympathy for the witnesses of the action was paramount for Woolf, as indicated in her journal of 1924, when she expressed concern that the "reviewers will say it [the novel] is disjointed because of the mad scenes not connecting with the Dalloway scenes" (*Diary* 2: 323). George Eliot, for whom art was "an extension of the sympathies" (*Essays* 270), showed a similar preoccupation with the sometimes widely divergent Deronda and Gwendolen stories of *Daniel Deronda* (*Letters* 4: 199, 290).

It is perhaps, then, not so surprising that two contemporary American novelists, Robin Lippincott and Michael Cunningham, both writing in the late 1990s, would create stories that are variations of *Mrs. Dalloway*. For them, the analogies were extended to what are ultimately issues of human interconnection, as viewed from a late-twentieth-century perspective. Their work is particu-

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larly helpful in understanding Woolf's original masterpiece, for the third-person strategies Lippincott and Cunningham use allow us to see, in a unique way, how a narrator's presence and a novel's dramatic design impact upon the reader's sympathetic experience. As Bret Keeling writes in his "Continuing Woolf: Postmodern Homages to *Mrs. Dalloway*," "the goal for both men is not authority or originality so much as it is relationship" (157). Robin Lippincott's *Mr. Dalloway* (1999) remains, however, closer to its predecessor, developing a continuous story confined to the stretches of one day and offering an omniscient narrator who speaks in past tense. The characters are largely those already seen in *Mrs. Dalloway*, although now at three years' distance from the original drama, with the action again gathering toward the culmination of a party, in this case the Dalloways' thirtieth wedding anniversary. Michael Cunningham's *The Hours* (1998), as well as David Hare's film script of that novel, creates three entirely separate but linked stories of Virginia Woolf, London-based writer of 1923 (and momentarily 1941), Laura Brown, Los Angeles housewife of 1949, and Clarissa Vaughan, New York literary editor of the late 1990s. In an interview, Cunningham has said that he enjoyed "the implication that the American experience is broad enough and deep enough to include three women of ambivalent sexuality one of whom is Virginia Woolf" (Wroe 1). A consistent present tense also forms a linkage, as though the divisions separating 1923, 1941, 1949, and the late 1990s—and indeed pre-World War II England, post World War II America, and the "now" of New York City—were merely superficial.

Strikingly, however, Cunningham's novel lessens the sympathetic experience of its predecessor because of the present tense he chooses and also the multiplex narrative framing. In *Tense and Narrativity*, Suzanne Fleischman shows how a story in present tense either moves toward the dramatic form—that is, a form without a narrator, or toward the lyrical genre, which is completely caught up in the subjectivity of the speaker (309). Either way, the connection between the narrator and the character

at hand is attenuated. Fleischman points to Genette's observations in *Narrative Discourse*, a work that comments that present creations have "the effect of unbalancing their equilibrium and allowing the whole of narrative to tip, according to the slightest shifting of emphasis, either onto the side of the story or onto the side of narrating, that is, the discourse" (219). With Michael Cunningham, we find the first emphasis, a kind of transparency that is "behaviorist" (Genette 219) at its essence. Lippincott, however, in remaining with the historical present of past tense as well as the omniscient narrator, catches the reader up in his story in ways very reminiscent of *Mrs. Dalloway*. Cunningham's narrator wants us to see the linkages; Lippincott wants us to undergo them. Quite ironically, and surprisingly, David Hare's script of *The Hours* ultimately creates a witnessing more like *Mrs. Dalloway* and *Mr. Dalloway* than the novel *The Hours* itself. This surprise may be because of a serious film's sometimes natural inclination to move toward pity and fear and its purgation—emotional elements belonging especially to the omniscient novel tradition.

In Woolf's novel, the gap of time separating the narrator from the world of Clarissa Dalloway, Septimus Warren Smith, and Peter Walsh facilitates connections between one event and another. This demonstration of cause and effect is perhaps most dramatically evident in the set-piece character portrait of Septimus, which comes early in the novel.

Septimus was one of the first to volunteer. He went to France to save an England which consisted almost entirely of Shakespeare's plays and Miss Isabel Pole in a green dress walking in a square. There in the trenches the change which Mr. Brewer desired when he advised football was produced instantly; he developed manliness; he was promoted; he drew the attention, indeed the affection of his officer, Evans by name [. . .]. They had to be together, share with each other, fight with each other, quarrel with each other [. . .]. [But] when Evans was killed, just before the Armistice, in Italy, Septimus, far from showing any emotion or recognizing that here was the end of a friendship, congratulated himself upon feeling very little and very reasonably. The War had taught him. (86)

Some of what drives Septimus to his window ledge is suggested here by a narrator who has had an opportunity to scan the consequences of World War I as well as the growing liabilities of “manliness,” suppressed grief, and homoerotic bonding. As Suzette Henke observes, “The novel was, among other things, a work of protest against the jingoist politics that sent idealistic men [. . .] to fight in the Great War of 1914-1918—a conflict emblematic of the mass psychosis that fuelled the tragic slaughter of a generation” (“Bloomsbury Blues: Virginia Woolf’s Moments and Michael Cunningham’s *Hours*”). The narrator also implies that this is not merely background material; Septimus is also experiencing some of these events as vivid memories, and the reader follows his lead in a manner similar to the way the audience understands Hamlet when he slays Polonius or leaps into Ophelia’s grave. The creation of cause and effect is central to *Mrs. Dalloway*, as made possible by a narrator who reflectively speaks of what happened rather than what is happening. Compassion and pastness go hand-in-hand.

Robin Lippincott offers a similar portrait of his outsider in *Mr. Dalloway*. The male lover of Richard, Robert Davies, or Robbie, experiences isolation that presses him toward his own form of madness, as bred, this time, of jealousy:

He had taken his degree at Oxford (for surely that meant *something*). He owned a home in Fitzroy Square (he had moved there from Hyde Park after his parents’ untimely death); he recorded this in the notebook. He had £500 a year until 1949 from his father (he listened to the pen scratch across the paper); there was his job (an editorial position with Faber). It was summer-time (now he was reaching; stretching and straining). And here his mind took what was, for him, an inevitable turn (and the pen skidded flat across the page), a turn toward thinking more about what he did *not have* (now he looked up into the sky as if . . .)—close family, love, meaning in life. His parents were dead; he had no siblings (though he’d almost had [. . .]). The man he loved—dare he say that?—and here he thought of Oscar Wilde—the man he loved belonged to someone else. (22)

As in Woolf, the portrait here suggests the sources of the pain and offers, virtually, an invitation to travel back for a closer look.

Also as in Woolf, the hero's anguish over loss has much to do with homophobia, both in himself and the outer social context. Just as the reader knows what post-World War I "manliness" might be like, so the reader would know what the crucified shadow of Oscar Wilde might mean to a man of Robbie's sensibility. It will be this protagonist's mission to seek out Richard and attempt to spoil the anniversary, but in this compassionate context, one understands why. As in the case of Septimus, we have done the detective work that makes distracted action explicable. In fact, Robbie's example also helps to explain the tragic suicide of Richard's brother, Duncan, who was also struggling with his own homophobia. In an interview, Robin Lippincott has said, "I see Mr. Dalloway's longing as not merely 'homosexual longing,' but as a longing for his lost brother, for his lost self, perhaps, and what is lost in his relationship with his wife, which is sexuality" (1).

There are no such set-piece descriptions or explanatory portraits in Michael Cunningham's *The Hours*. The chapters develop detail, action, thought as they arrive, and so the voice of the novel is not so much a person as an observance. As Birgit Spengler writes, "the reader receives insights into the characters' thoughts, but does not gain immediate access to their minds" (69). Similarly, in "*The Hours* as Second-degree Narrative," Seymour Chatman, after detailing the "Dallowayisms" (274) of Cunningham, comments, "But there are important nuances of *Mrs. Dalloway's* style which Cunningham seems to miss or ignore. Their absence affects the degree and nature of our immersion in his characters' psyches" (275). Although Cunningham will offer one character's reflections on another, as he does in Clarissa Vaughan's musings on Richard's special gifts, mostly we are getting news as it happens. Even Virginia Woolf's historic suicide and death are told in the present tense, so that while one may draw one's own conclusions from the note the despondent author of *Mrs. Dalloway* leaves behind (Cunningham offers the full text), the narrator does not offer any reasons. At the end of this "Prologue," one is taken into moments outside any point of

view whatsoever, once Virginia's consciousness is killed off, and the scene is presented in the most detached way possible: "Here they are, on a day early in the Second World War: the boy and his mother on the bridge, the stick floating over the water's surface, and Virginia's body at the river's bottom, as if she is dreaming of the surface, the stick, the boy and his mother, the sky and the rooks" (8). This passage contrasts with not only all the explanations history has offered concerning Woolf's suicide but also the very technique and perspective the celebrated writer used in many of her own novels. It is as if Cunningham is extinguishing the compassionate narrator in two forms, both as a literal historical personage and as the sympathizing presence of her literary voice. The Second World War, the boy, the mother, the stick, the sky, and the rooks are all on an equal plane, and all offer nothing to make sense of what has just happened. This is why reviewers who automatically link *The Hours's* prose to Woolf's are missing an essential element of Woolf's art. It is Lippincott's chapters that offer the full resonance with Woolf.

In comparison to both of her contemporary sons, however, Woolf is more omniscient than either. The most striking example of this difference comes, perhaps, at the center of *Mrs. Dalloway*, where the pathos of the Septimus tragedy leads to an editorial vision that governs the entire novel:

Proportion, divine proportion, Sir William's goddess, was acquired by Sir William walking hospitals, catching salmon, begetting one son in Harley Street by Lady Bradshaw, who caught salmon herself and took photographs scarcely to be distinguished from the work of professionals. Worshipping proportion, Sir William not only prospered himself but made England prosper, secluded her lunatics, forbade childbirth, penalised despair, made it impossible for the unfit to propagate their views until they, too, shared his sense of proportion—his, if they were men, Lady Bradshaw's if they were women [. . .]. (99)

The reflective authority of this overview accentuates the distance between the past being narrated and whatever "present" the narrator is living in, for once again the narrator has had time

to compose a vision and indeed a passionate critique. In fact, this passage and the sentences that follow on the next two pages become a key to the plights of all the major characters, for in some way, each is tyrannized over by Proportion and will stand or fall by how the challenge is met. Although J. Hillis Miller attributes some of these reflections to the mind of Rezia (*Fiction* 179), it is clear that the omniscient narrator is standing above all her cast to make a point.

Pamela Caughie's *Virginia Woolf and Postmodernism: Literature in Quest and Question of Itself* offers an important encapsulation of the debate surrounding the relative prominence or invisibility of the narrator in the novel. She points out that Howard Harper, Maria DiBattista, James Naremore, and J. Hillis Miller, taking their cue from Woolf's own comments on the composition of *Mrs. Dalloway* and on a theory of a novel "all crepuscular" (*Diary* 2: 13), overstress the book as a medley of voices rather than one that has a clear and guiding narrator who connects the voices (Caughie 73-75). Certainly Joseph Boone may be added to this list when he says, "Mirroring Woolf's wish to create a novel without 'scaffolding' and with 'scarcely a break seen,' the narrative of this novel glides in and out of the inner worlds of its characters, shifts from one viewpoint to another, leaps from past to present, and moves from one event to the next without a perceptible break" (179). But even Caughie does not do full justice to a primary experience of the novel when she insists that even this narrator is made at one with all the characters and that Woolf is "inhibiting our tendency to seek the author's view in the characters or in the narrator" (74). The voice of sections like the Proportion passage is very strong, is elevated above the indirect free discourse, and provides that unity frequently associated with a novel narrated in the past and whose goal is a sympathetic response.

This reflective authority is extended, stylistically, to the virtually Virgilian presence of a narrator who engages in all the flourish of epic similes. As Naremore (94) also points out,

there is, for example, the moment when Peter, in barging in on Clarissa, becomes stymied by both love and nostalgia: "Then, just as happens on a terrace in the moonlight, when one person begins to feel ashamed that he is already bored, and yet as the other sits silent, very quiet, sadly looking at the moon, does not like to speak, moves his foot, clears his throat, notices some iron scroll on a table leg, stirs a leg, but says nothing—so Peter Walsh did now" (42). The reader is clearly made aware of the narrative artifice but also, through it, of the universality of Peter's experience: precisely the original goal of the epic simile that delights in surprising likenesses and can, in fact, warm a cold polity by comparing it to a hive full of bees, as in the first book of *The Aeneid*.

The closest Robin Lippincott comes to Woolf's aerial perspective is in an extended meditation, again through the perspective of Robbie, on the example of Oscar Wilde:

Since that time, Wilde's name had all but vanished, was but a joke or a mere whisper on the lips of the very few, at certain times and in certain places, though he supposed that there were righteous souls in the purlieus of London who still invoked the suggestive name—"Wilde"—(with their eyes flashing, nostrils flaring). They would speak of what he had done and, more importantly for their purposes, *what had been done to him*, to deter young boys, their sons no doubt from certain perfectly normal activity. (69)

The vision of a world hostile to normal gay relations certainly becomes a key to the novel, since we cannot understand the triumph of Richard taking Robbie's hand at the end until we grasp the social context that would condemn such intimacy. At the same time, however, Lippincott filters these reflections entirely through the mind of Robbie, so much so we hear the cadences of his voice. While such a technique of indirect free discourse is certainly a hallmark of Virginia Woolf's writing, the pinnacle "Proportion" passage actually belongs solely to the narrator, whose insights are accentuated by the "pastness" that helps disclose a common denominator—a villain whose sister villain is



Conversion. Here the vision, while being embraced eventually by the novel, is primarily the province of Robbie's thoughts.

In *The Hours*, there is no embrace at all, no coordinate key criticizing the limits society imposes. Cunningham, of course, is not so much concerned with the challenges conformity brings as he is with the general erosion of time and aging. The book is more about death than liberation. In fact, ironically, although the novel is told in present tense, one could actually see the combined stories as a Voyage to the Underworld, where Laura, Clarissa, and Virginia all keep company more closely with the dead than they do the living. The present tense is essential to the power of this experience. The narrator does not have the opportunity to resurrect the characters by telling their stories in the rejuvenation of the past. In the moment where Clarissa Vaughan finds Richard on the ledge, the present tense gives death a much more severing force:

Clarissa draws a breath, and another. She is surprisingly calm—she can feel herself acting well in a difficult situation—but at the same time is removed from herself, from the room, as if she is witnessing something that's already happened. It feels like a memory. Something within her, something like a voice but not a voice, an inner knowledge all but indistinguishable from the pump of her heart, says, *Once I found Richard sitting on a window ledge five stories above the ground.* (197)

Narrated in present tense, death is unmitigating, since those who die—as Richard does—are forever separated from those in the *dramatis personae* who do not. If this scene were told in the past, Clarissa's time frame would be shared with Richard's; both would be characters who are "gone" and yet alive again. As a matter of fact, this fictionalized mutuality is exactly what she hopes for in this scene but is denied, thus the inexorability of the separation. The same may be said of Laura, who, in the present tense of her late 1940s life, reads the past tense novel of a genius who died eight years earlier.

A convergence of characters occurs at the end of each of the novels, and in these meeting points, the presence of the narrator

varies widely. Writing of the way Virginia Woolf approached her characterization of Mrs. Dalloway, Lyndall Gordon, in *Virginia Woolf: A Writer's Life*, observes that

[ . . . ] as Virginia Woolf moved from a detached, mocking view of Mrs. Dalloway into the shadows of her past, she brought herself closer to artistic maturity. If she were to become a great novelist, she had to learn as Katherine Mansfield had advised, to "merge" with someone alien to herself (or her sister or brother, the family sources of the first three novels). And if she were to transcend the modish disillusion of the post-war period she had, as Forster had urged, to create a lovable character. (189)

Part of the solution came in bringing Septimus Warren Smith's tragedy into the life of the London hostess. At first, Clarissa's response is superficial and alienating—"What business had the Bradshaws to talk of death at her party?" (184). In her further thoughts, however, Clarissa begins to take on the properties of the reflecting narrator and becomes choral figure to Septimus's plight:

But this young man who had killed himself—had he plunged holding his treasure? "If it were now to die, 'twere now to be most happy," she had said to herself once, coming down in white.

Or there were the poets and thinkers. Suppose he had had that passion, and had gone to Sir William Bradshaw, a great doctor yet to her obscurely evil, without sex or lust, extremely polite to women, but capable of some indescribable outrage—forcing your soul, that was it—this young man had gone to him, and Sir William had impressed him, like that, with his power, might he not then have said (indeed she felt it now), Life is made intolerable; they make life intolerable, men like that? (184-85)

In becoming Horatio to Septimus's Hamlet, or Chorus to his Antigone, Clarissa could not carry the force of her stance had not the narrator prepared the way via the various sympathetic connections of cause and effect. The above is just an extension of the earlier Septimus portrait as well as the overview on Proportion and Conversion, but this time in Clarissa's connective mind, which reflects the narrator's more than anyone else's. Certainly it is quite startling that Clarissa's experience of Septimus's death is more dramatic and poetically realized than Septimus's

own—"and then a suffocation of blackness"—but Woolf is making the convergence as complete as possible. "Somehow it was her disaster—her disgrace" (185). For the reader, it is possible, through Clarissa, to know why the suicide happened and what its meaning is.

In Lippincott, the convergence arrives when Robbie barges in on the Dalloways' witnessing of the solar eclipse of 1927—the context of the celebration of their thirtieth anniversary. With Septimus's precedent uppermost in the reader's mind, Lippincott very deliberately steers the plot away from suicide, so that the ending becomes a very pointed affirmation not only of heterosexual marriage but of the gay male experience:

He looked to Clarissa, who was marvelling over the eclipse with Lady Hosford. (It was all right, he told himself: she understood.) Oblivious to any concern about appearances or to what might or might not be the coincidence of just *how* Robbie happened to be there, all he could think was that this might be his last chance to prove to himself that his soul was not dead.

He tightened his grasp of Clarissa's hand (and, still talking with Lady Hosford, she squeezed his hand in return). Then, there, in the sunlight, amidst the crowd, he took Robbie's hand in his, briefly, without even looking at him, and then he let it go. Only for a moment, but it was enough. It was beginning. (215)

In a novel where the characters have been hounded by a sense of a sexual "norm"—or Proportion, if you will—Richard Dalloway's action defies what the narrator has disclosed as a common source of anguish. Lippincott's day has been long enough to cause Richard to face his homophobia; he becomes lovable in the way Woolf's Clarissa becomes so when she defies the threats to her soul and those of others.

Two reviewers have unfairly compared *Mr. Dalloway* with *The Hours*, and what seems particularly telling is neither one refers to the issue of tense or narrative stance.<sup>1</sup> Actually we can say that

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<sup>1</sup>See Bruce Allen's review of Lippincott's *Mr. Dalloway* (*NY Times* "Book Reviews" 1 Aug. 1999: 14), and Karen Levenbeck's review of *The Hours: A Novel* by Michael Cunningham, *Mr. Dalloway: A Novella* by Robin Lippincott, *Mitz: The Marmoset of Bloomsbury* by Sigrid

while connections of psychological explanation are the very hallmark of *Mrs. Dalloway* and *Mr. Dalloway*, they are not central at all to the present tense narrative of *The Hours*; rather the emphasis falls on the analogical webbing between characters almost wholly separated in time and space. In this sense, the present tense can accentuate remarkable parallels and re-embodiments, because 1923, 1941, 1949, and the end of the twentieth century are all equally present. At the same time, however, the parallels do not really offer an informed understanding of the psyches of the various players. If we were to look at one character in whom most of the roads meet, it would be Cunningham's Richard again, who, while clearly paralleling Virginia, Laura, and Clarissa, also carries features of Richard Dalloway, Septimus Smith, and Peter Walsh. Interestingly enough, however, while absolutely central to the novel, Richard Brown's story is not really illuminated by Virginia Woolf's or even Laura Brown's. In addition, his tragedy is never evoked from his own point of view. In dramatic contradistinction to all his literary avatars, particularly Septimus, and including Robert Davies and Lippincott's Richard Dalloway, Cunningham's Richard remains understood only through perspectives outside him. Thus any attempt to find cause and effect from his own perspective is rendered difficult and ultimately impossible, a deliberate frustration accentuated by the present tense itself. Even when he is on the ledge, we are in Clarissa's mind, not his. Therefore no flashback is going to render meaning. In his article, "Rewriting Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*: Homage, Sexual Identity, and the Single-Day Novel by Cunningham, Lippincott, and Lanchester," James Schiff, although giving *Mr. Dalloway* more of its due, ultimately concludes that "because Lippincott risks so little and remains so reverential to Woolf and her world, the effort finally feels more like imitation than reinvention" (347).

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Nunez, Virginia Woolf's "Jacob's Room": *The Holograph Draft* edited and transcribed by Edward L. Bishop, and Virginia Woolf "The Hours": *The British Museum Manuscript of Mrs. Dalloway* (*Woolf Studies Annual*. New York: Pace UP, 2000. 198-206).

It would seem that Lippincott, however, by remaining true to Woolf's use of the compassionate past tense, as well as the more inclusive omnibus perspective, has actually created the more daring enterprise, since he finally asks the reader to set up permanent lodgings in the mind of a gay man, one who, indeed, is under pressure and threatened with exile.

In contrast also, when Cunningham moves two of his plots toward convergence—and toward a party that does not occur—his narrator remains noncommittal. The reader has been waiting a long time to find out what Richard and Laura have to do with each other, and when we are given the link, the outlook is as removed as the one that presented the death of Woolf the author:

So Laura Brown, the woman who tried to die and failed at it, the woman who fled her family, is alive when all the others, all those who struggled to survive in her wake, have passed away. She is alive now, after her ex-husband has been carried off by liver cancer, after her daughter has been killed by a drunk driver. She is alive after Richard has jumped from a window onto a bed of broken glass. (222)

As opposed to Woolf and Lippincott, this is not a world where a disclosed cause-and-effect opens up an alternative way of living, free of homophobia or psychological oppression. Although Laura is, after all, Richard or Ritchie's mother, the solution of the mystery offers no comment on how current society might be coped with. We are simply engulfed in the hours and ultimately consumed by the dead whose presence finally outweighs that of the survivors. Freed from a morally comprehensible universe, Laura Brown is not lovable or unlovable, any more than Clarissa Vaughan is. Consistent with the removed and non-commenting narrator, Clarissa, after the Laura Brown disclosure, undergoes an observation rather than an epiphany: "We live our lives, do whatever we do, and then we sleep—it's as simple and ordinary as that. A few jump out of windows or drown themselves or take pills; more die by accident; and most of us, the vast majority, are slowly devoured by some disease or, if we're very fortunate, by time itself" (225).

The arrival of Stephen Daldry's film and John Hare's script of *The Hours* in 2002 provided remarkable illumination of all of these distinctions, for while, in some ways, remaining remarkably true to Cunningham's three stories, the cinematic view ultimately becomes compassionate and reflective rather than solely observant in the way the previous passage is. In the various scenes, it is as though we have a commenting narrator who has had the time to draw psychological conclusions about the characters. This presence is particularly evident, particularly Woolfian, when Richard's suicide nears:

INT. RICHARD'S APARTMENT

EVE.

RICHARD's face seen from the exact same point of view. The child has become the man. RICHARD [as played by Ed Harris] is sitting in the near dark, a gleam of light catching the sweat on his forehead. He has not moved from his chair, nor has he dressed. He sits thinking back to the scene in the car. LAURA'S voice is heard in RICHARD's head.

LAURA (*v.o.*)

I love you, sweetheart. You're my guy. (99)

Here Hare (and eventually the director Daldry) recreate a flashback directly from Richard's point of view that serves to explain if not the reason he commits suicide, at least some of the points in time he carries with him to the grave. Movingly, two scenes later, the directions call for "Beside RICHARD, a photograph of his mother, LAURA, on her wedding day, eyes down. RICHARD looks at it, the extreme sweat of illness running down his face" (100). This greater pathos becomes even larger when actor Ed Harris departs, stunningly, from the text and weeps as well. As in the case of Septimus, grief has a great deal to do with the suicide. Such a disclosure, although remarkable on the screen, is quite far removed from Cunningham's original *The Hours*, which leaves the Laura Brown revelation up to the initial conversation of the last chapter: "Clarissa says, 'Julia, this is Laura Brown'" (218), which again shows its insistence on the present tense. In thus moving toward anagnorisis, and away

from Cunningham, the film asserts a technique afforded by the original *Mrs. Dalloway* and its past tense structure while offering its own purgation of the pathos. This direction is extended when Hare and Daldry add a scene linking Laura and Julia as a kind of mother and daughter:

Instinctively JULIA moves towards her and puts her arms around her. The 18 year-old and the 80 year-old embrace. LAURA stands a moment, astonished at her warmth. Then JULIA moves away.

LAURA

Good night, sweetheart.

JULIA

Good night. (121)

It is as though Julia has learned something about being overly distant from one's own family, a theme which certainly unifies the film but is distinctly missing from the book, since in that text all is guided toward the surprise of Laura's identity rather than the reflections her reappearance causes, both in Richard and Julia. In the film, Julia, by implication, becomes choral figure to the plights of several of the characters.

In interviews and readings Michael Cunningham has been very open about the evolution of his novel and the surprise of its success. He has observed,

It seemed at one moment I was sitting at my desk wondering if anyone would want to read *The Hours*, my unorthodox novel in which Virginia Woolf was a prominent character, and the next I was on a set outside London, being asked by an assistant director if I'd like to stick around and see Nicole Kidman in her Virginia Woolf nose. ("For *The Hours*")

The stunning success that has attended these particular children of *Mrs. Dalloway*, both novel and film, was responsible, of course, for making the original masterpiece a bestseller for the first time in seventy-five years, as well as developing Virginia Woolf as a "part" that would win an Oscar for Best Actress. Such a remarkable reception may, in fact, shed light on the kind of liabilities developed by the 1924 text itself and may ultimately prove to be not so surprising. For in the original *Mrs. Dalloway*

we are asked, by a narrator of authority, to participate in minds initially unfamiliar and alienating, and all in a context showing the dangers of Proportion and Conversion. The sympathy we must bring to bear upon these characters, along with the author's unifying vision, is indeed taxing, so much so we must even come to identify with Septimus's suppressed homoeroticism and Clarissa's deep lesbian inclination. The same may be said of Lippincott's *Mr. Dalloway*, whose reception has been much more like that of its predecessor than *The Hours*. As James Schiff writes, "In Lippincott's novel, male homosexuality rises to the surface and becomes central" (375).

All three novels are works of great beauty and charm, and the same may be said of the film Hare and Daldry created in the wake of Cunningham's success. But without speculating too far, one may observe that the taxations of sympathy in the novel *The Hours* are remarkably less. The agon of its gay character, for example, is brief, quickly extinguished, and without evocation from his own point of view. As Jeanette McVicker writes, "Richard's character seems emptied out of the world, rather than providing us with a visionary expression of the truth of a world that is simultaneously oppressive and filled with moments of joy" (8). Cunningham, in fact, achieves the kind of polyphonic experience Caughie saw in the original without asking us to delve into a troubling overview that suggests psychological cause-and-effect and affirms that society needs to be changed, particularly in the areas of the gay and lesbian experience. We do not weigh the threats of conformity and conversion as we do in Lippincott and Woolf. To put it directly, the public has seemed far more ready to accept a Virginia Woolf who would, on film and on the page, turn into Ophelia and float down the river than one who actually shared Shakespeare's stature of genius and wrote monumental works that would challenge our assumptions about what is normal and buried deep in the "tunnels" of the soul (See *Diary 2*: 272). In the *Poets and Writers* profile, *The Hours* is noted to have been initially conceived as a "commentary on contemporary gay life,



with its protagonist a 52-year-old gay man living in Manhattan" (Bahr 21). One is inclined to speculate that if Cunningham had followed his original conception, within a framework fully imitating the original, *The Hours* would have encountered a reception much like Lippincott's and the original Woolf's.

When the Prologue of *The Hours* shows Virginia not only drowning herself but also passing, as a corpse without consciousness, down the Ouse, we are prepared for a kind of drowning of point of view that the present tense accentuates. The author of the more interior and yet occasionally editorializing *Mrs. Dalloway* is dead, and we witness her remains caught up in time. Also, symbolically, Richard Brown parallels her by becoming the extinguished creator of his own impossibly long novel of consciousness. Thus what Cunningham called his jazz "rift" (Wroe 1) upon a great predecessor has its separate purposes, creating a medley of characters who seem linked in their artistic DNA but who exist in dimensions of narrative which are quite distinct from the "older established piece of music" (Wroe 2). Ironically, the even more current film, however, brings us back to a perspective sometimes more coordinate with the greater compassion of past tense narration and thus the original masterpiece, and the lesser known compeer, *Mr. Dalloway*, remains a challenging piece to be appreciated as more fully Woolfian.

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